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ABSTRACT

During his years on an urban school board, the author, a sociologist specializing in education, found conditions that were completely reversed from those ascribed to school boards by Norman D. Kerr and other analysts. The school board election campaigns observed by the author, unlike those studied by Kerr, were interesting and highly organized events during which informally supported candidates were exposed to and discussed many issues that were of great concern to district residents. Many new school board members attended workshops or conventions sponsored by school boards associations and thus did not have to depend on expertise provided by the school administration. Disagreement on the board was allowed to come out in the open. These differences from Kerr's findings may be ascribable to several factors: Kerr studied boards in communities more stable and homogeneous than the author's; "sunshine laws" have made board disagreements harder to conceal from the public; such educational issues as busing, teacher union militancy, changing school demographics, rising costs, and reduced financial support have proved highly controversial and raised public interest and involvement; and support groups like school boards associations have made boards more independent. (Author/PGD)

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The School Board as an Agency of Legitimation and Change

by

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The School Board as an Agency of Legitimation and Change

Eighteen years ago Kerr set forth the proposition

> ". . . that under some conditions, which may not be uncommon, school boards chiefly perform the function of legitimating the policies of the school system to the community, rather than representing the various segments of the community to the school administration (1964:35)."

Since then other analysts have reached essentially the same conclusion, namely that school boards tend to be ineffective instruments of representation and change (Callahan 1966:16-34; Iannoccone and Lutz 1970: 231; Ziegler and Jennings 1974:250). Kerr's analysis of the dynamics by which board inefficacy is brought about still has relevance today. However, my personal experiences as a board member lead me to believe that Kerr's analysis needs to be updated and modified in the light of contemporary realities.

Research Site and Strategy

The research was conducted in Eastmoreland (pseudonym), a small town located within an American megalopolis. It is like rural towns in size (somewhat less than two square miles) and in terms of the strong ties of friendship, kinship and senti-

ment which bind longtime residents to the community. Unlike most rural communities, however, its population is dense (15,000 residents) and diverse in terms of social class, race, religion and age. A significant degree of cohesion within this heterogeneous population results from certain values: liberalism, cosmopolitanism and, above all, achievement-success. The public school system is the community's pride and has long acted as a magnet for young families seeking educational excellence.

This is a participant observation study. I have served as a member and President of the Eastmoreland Board of Education. As a sociologist specializing in education, I could not resist the temptation to collect field notes and documentary materials with the thought that they might ultimately lead to some interesting insights. My status as a participant observer was widely recognized by fellow board members, administrators and members of the public. It is important to note that my emphasis was always on participation, not observation.

Analysis and Interpretations

School Board Politics

Kerr found that school board elections were dull in the communities he studied. They were nonpartisan affairs in which

poorly informed individuals sought election without organized backing and without clear issues.

In recent years school board campaigns in Eastmoreland have been hotly contested rather than dull. A grass roots movement formed as a result of community discontent with the quality of administration and curriculum. The campaigns organized by a small, essentially leaderless, group of long-time residents have unseated incumbents and changed the balance of power on the board. At present a counter-movement is forming.

Social relationships within Eastmoreland are patterned by geography, social class, race, religion, political ideology and leisure interests. A sociogram would reveal a complex pattern of cliques and crowds, friendship and kinship networks and neighborhood associations. Often these primary groups are rooted in or reinforced by formal organizational membership. For example, there is a jock crowd which is active in the city recreation commission and sports leagues. The organizers of board campaigns are intimately familiar with the informal power structure of the community and have wide contacts. The key to victory lies in gaining the endorsements of informal opinion leaders, not organizational officials. Indeed those formal organizations most attentive to school affairs -- the political parties, the Parent-Teacher Associations, the League of Women Voters and the teachers' union -- are supposed to remain scrupulously

neutral in board elections. It would be dangerous for any of these organizations to become involved even covertly because such actions might well backfire.

Thus, the electorate is organized, but informally, in ways not easily observable to an outsider. And these informal groups do have positions on educational issues, support candidates and monitor the actions of their elected representatives. The resultant ties and loyalties between board members and their constituents may be just as strong or even stronger than those bonds which result from formal organizational endorsements and support.

Kerr observed that the " . . . notorious paucity of issues in school board elections also testifies to the absence of constituencies (1964: 40)." But there have been many hot issues in Eastmoreland in recent years. A state agency noted some racial imbalance in the schools and directed that it be corrected. Although desegregation was not actively resisted, Eastmoreland being a liberal community, in the process, the traditional neighborhood school concept was abandoned and bussing was initiated for the first time. Monetary pressures forced the closing of an elementary school at the same time. Community dissatisfaction over the educational process in the reorganized schools and with the administration resulted in the resignation of the superintendent. More recently the school board has been pressed by state officials to institute a gifted and talented program. And state-imposed fiscal caps, coupled with declining enroll-

ments and soaring costs, have produced a severe financial squeeze. Not surprisingly labor militancy has increased as reductions in force loom on the horizon. It is possible that another school may have to be closed very soon and the schools reorganized once more. And consolidation with neighboring districts may have to be seriously considered within the next few years. The point is that the Eastmoreland school board has been forced to deal with major changes wrought by forces beyond its control.

These events have raised significant educational policy questions. How can the quality of a curriculum be maintained in the context of declining enrollments, high rates of inflation and diminishing funding? How can an optimum balance between the academic and extracurricular programs be maintained? Should pupil placements for instructional purposes be made on the basis of individual needs or group quotas? Should the board rubber stamp the proposals of the administration and/or the teachers' union or should it act as a representative body and push for desired changes even when the professionals resist?

It is true that these issues are often poorly articulated and incompletely debated. Public statements are often deliberately vague. This is primarily due to the fear that focused debate will result in negative publicity for the school system and community. However, these sensitive and

often divisive issues are often discussed at the numerous informal coffees which are a central part of school board campaigns in Eastmoreland.

This brings us to Kerr's next observation. He found that the new board members in the communities he studied were often unfamiliar with the school program and school board activities. There can be little doubt that the public in general is quite ignorant of these matters (Parelius and Parelius 1978: 246-8). But does that hold true for prospective board members?

In Eastmoreland, school board candidates generally are drawn from the rather narrow segment of the community which comprises the public school system's attentive public. Not only have they followed school affairs as interested citizens, all but one of the nine present members are more directly involved as the parents of children attending the schools. Furthermore, most have relevant occupational and/or public service experiences. Two board members have taught school in other districts. Five have been college professors. Two others have chaired the boards of public welfare associations. It is obviously a rather high powered board.

Six of the nine board members came to the board as a result of the grass roots movement which has been mentioned. These individuals were convinced to run, given background briefings, coached and supported both financially and

organizationally by this small circle of activists. The campaigns this group organized were great learning experiences for the candidates. They consisted primarily of a series of 10-14 evening coffees held in private homes throughout the town. These coffees provided opportunities for candidates and a broad spectrum of citizens to articulate and discuss issues affecting the entire district. There is no doubt that candidates learned a great deal during the campaigns. For example, one candidate started out as an opponent of an all-day kindergarten and was a strong proponent by the time he was sworn in.

In sum, Eastmoreland's school board campaigns are relatively interesting and highly organized events during which informally supported candidates are exposed to and discuss the many issues facing the district.

Socialization and Pressures for Conformity

Kerr found that new board members were inducted into their roles by administrators and sitting board members. New members were overwhelmed by the complex laws, policies, rules and regulations governing board operations. They were encouraged to refrain from rocking the boat and to defer to experts in all educational matters. Diversion, divide and conquer, cooptation and persuasion were among the tactics

used by superintendents to keep potentially disruptive board members in line. The board president and other experienced board members used similar tactics as well as derision and shunning to isolate those who refused to play ball with the majority. Again Kerr felt that in the absence of visible constituencies, clearly defined issues and knowledgeable board members, the pressures for conformity could not easily be resisted.

Once again the Eastmoreland circumstance is quite different. We have already noted that newly elected board members do represent constituencies and are relatively knowledgeable, having developed positions on many issues. This is not to say that there are no attempts to socialize new board members, however.

On the contrary the neophyte is likely to learn from the administration and fellow board members (1) that there is a chain of command which should be respected at all times, (2) one must work through the entire board and not act as a "lone ranger," (3) one should avoid whenever possible the public embarassment of another board member or an administrator, and (4) calls for change will be controversial and should not be done in a way which produces adverse publicity for the district. The combined effect of these might well be to cool the critical fervor of new members were it not for the fact that those members are also socialized by the

state School Boards Association.

The School Boards Association is an organization devoted to the purpose of improving school board effectiveness. It attempts to do this through educational programs and consulting services. The School Boards Association conducts intensive weekend workshops for new board members. These might have been consciously designed to neutralize the potentially debilitating socialization provided by superintendents and older board members. The topics covered deal with most, if not all, of the areas about which a novice might be uncertain: board responsibilities, ethics, the conduct of board meetings, board/superintendent relationships and division of labor, curriculum, board policies, budget process, school law, labor relations and public relations. Novice members are encouraged to return to their boards determined to speak their piece rather than being quiet and deferent, to propose changes which would make the board more effective, and to take advantage of the pamphlets, books, special workshops, field services and consulting services made available through the School Boards Association. The experience does not make one an "instant expert" on all aspects of public education. But it does provide a basic orientation and, more importantly perhaps, it shows a board member how to get expert opinion on topics from individuals who are committed to strong boards. Thus, board members need

not depend solely upon the advice of the superintendent. The superintendent's monopoly of expertise is broken. State and national school boards conferences also serve to stimulate new ideas and change. The attempts of state and national school boards associations to transform board members from quiescent laymen to assertive quasi-professional representatives of their communities should be of great interest to those of us concerned with the politics of education. Five of the most recently elected members of the Eastmoreland board have attended workshops and/or conventions and they have consistently brought new perspectives and ideas back to the board as a result. If these associations are broadly successful, they contribute quite directly to an alteration of the balance of power on local school boards.

Community Pressures

Kerr observed a tendency for board members to become alienated and to conceal disagreements from the public. Alienation set in as it became clear to board members that their actions were being unfairly citicized by citizens who were unfamiliar with the legal, contractual, financial and educational constraints faced by the board. Concealment developed as a response to potential criticism. Board members acted on an informal norm that all public votes should be

unanimous. Controversial matters were handled in executive session and not publicly debated. It was felt that division within the Board would encourage critics and possibly cause the defeat of the school budget.

Again Kerr's observations appear outdated. The state "Sunshine Law" requires that all topics other than specified exceptions be discussed in public. Eastmoreland board members take this regulation quite seriously. Once a board member underscored his concern by walking out of a private meeting at which he felt an illegal topic was being discussed. Thus, the Eastmoreland board has recently debated and openly split on controversial proposals relating to desegregation and the gifted and talented program. In the near future there may well be heated sessions dealing with the budget, reductions in the teaching force, future school closings and grade reorganization. The Eastmoreland Education Association (the teachers' union) as well as various community groups can be expected to speak out and criticize proposals before the board. These heated public sessions are not pleasant, but board members have accommodated themselves to the legal mandate for openness.

To my knowledge members of the Eastmoreland Board of Education are not alienated from the public. Although they occasionally express resentment about unfair or uninformed criticisms, they are generally quite patient and somewhat

open-minded in listening to the public at Board meetings. Most Board members seem highly cognizant of their responsibilities as representatives of the public as a whole and especially of those who supported their candidacy.

Summary and Conclusions

Obviously school politics Eastmoreland style differs radically from the processes Kerr observed in other communities. What can be made of this?

First, there is the sampling issue. The communities Kerr studied were relatively homogeneous and stable compared to Eastmoreland. Ziegler and Jennings found that diversity in population and controversy in school politics was associated with contested school campaigns. (Ziegler and Jennings 1974: 161-241). What has been observed in Eastmoreland may be characteristic of communities with its particular social composition and level of tension over educational issues.

It also appears that Kerr's analysis is outdated in at least two respects. First, the widely adopted "Sunshine Laws" have probably been somewhat successful in decreasing tendencies on the part of board members to make decisions behind closed doors. Secondly, many, perhaps most, boards now operate within more turbulent and contentious political environments. Legislative and judicial activism regarding education

has increased and generated controversy. Teachers' unions have become far more militant. Furthermore population shifts, declining birth rates and anticipated cuts in federal aid are forcing many local districts to make difficult and potentially divisive decisions regarding retrenchment. It seems highly likely that cutbacks will often generate organized opposition from those with vested interests in the status quo, especially teachers' unions.

It may also be that participant observation or at least very intensive ethnographic case studies may be necessary to illuminate some of the dynamics of school board politics. For example, the processes by which candidates are recruited and socialized prior to, during and after the campaign are subtle and not easily observable to outsiders. The candidates themselves may not be fully aware of them!

To my knowledge social scientists have ignored the role of School Boards Associations in school politics up until now. Observations of the Eastmoreland school board lead me to believe that these organizations play central roles as professionalizing influences, catalysts for change and defenders of the representational function of school boards. Again it is possible that this particular board is completely idiosyncratic and that the School Boards Associations have a negligible role overall. But I don't think so, and certainly in light of its theoretical importance and potentially crucial pragmatic impact, the School Boards Associations deserve further attention.

In conclusion this single negative case does not, of course, invalidate Kerr's analysis. Kerr merely called attention to certain " . . . conditions which may not be uncommon" (italics ours) where the legitimation function may predominate. This paper emphasizes the other side of the issue -- circumstances under which representation may be more important than legitimation. Actually it is probably true that most individual board members and entire boards act as agents of legitimation on some occasions and as agents of change on others. Our task should be to further specify the conditions and issues where these different functions predominate. It seems clear that grass roots movements can still have an impact on school board elections. We need to know more about the dynamics of these basic political phenomena within education.

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